EDITED VERSION

MASS APPEAL: THE BEST OF GANG STARR

In the late 1980s,

In the late 1980s, known rightly as "the Golden Era of Rap," rappers and rap groups strove to be the best – and to that end, they strove to be different. Creating a distinctive, original identity and presenting a new sound were keys to success and acceptance during this creatively rich period in rap. Public Enemy's politically charged raps and dense, assaulting beats made them harbingers of the street-level rage bubbling as a by-product of Reaganomics. Slick Rick's comic, plot-driven raps, ghetto-fabulous fashion sense and festive beats made him rap's preeminent storyteller. De La Soul wore tie-died shirts, rapped in code language and used enough left-of-center samples to earn themselves a reputation as rap's hippies.

For Gang Starr, it was jazz. Sure, rapper Guru's steely monotone delivery style and DJ Premier's turntable gymnastics and powerful drums made them an act to watch upon the release of their 1989 hit *Manifest*. But that stellar track only hinted at the greatness and innovation that Gang Starr would unleash over the next decade-plus. The best of Gang Starr's standout tracks are compiled here for

a definitive look at an unlikely rap duo that achieved brilliant artistry and a level of greatness that put Guru and DJ Premier among rap's most important contributors.

In era when most rap groups were comprised of lifelong friends, former Boston resident Guru and Houston native DJ Premier set up shop in Brooklyn only after being paired in the late 1980s by Wild Pitch Records. Nonetheless, the two soon clicked, bonding over their deep love for and knowledge of music. Each accepted defined roles in Gang Starr – Guru would handle the rhymes, Premier the beats.

"I told Guru at the beginning, 'I have to do the album. If I do the album, believe me it will pop off. We'll have good singles,'" DJ Premier told me in a February 2006 interview. "I know how to pick singles. I know how to pick everything. I really have that much of an understanding of the music business, and that's the reason why I think I'll always be able to prevail."

Manifest was included on Gang Starr's debut album, 1989's promising No More Mr. Nice Guy, which also features the jazz mélange *Jazz Music*, a cut that hinted at things to come. Gang Starr was enlisted the following year by filmmaker Spike Lee to contribute a track to his jazz-themed Mo' Betta Blues. *Jazz Thing* captures Guru giving a musical history lesson, and it solidified Gang Starr's reputation as the rap group who drew its sonic strength from a jazz backbone.

By the time Gang Starr reemerged in 1991 with their second album – the superb Step In The Arena – Guru's lyrical acumen and reach had increased exponentially, and DJ Premier's production prowess took an equally quantum leap, using the jazz foundation that earned the group its star status and wielding a stunning aural arsenal. Always the visionary, Premier knew that he had to enhance and evolve Gang Starr's sound in order to stay relevant.

"I started using weird sounds and other types of samples just to stay way from [being categorized]," DJ Premier told me in an August 1998 interview. "I use what it takes to make the tracks identify what me and Guru are all about."

To this end, street parable *Just To Get A Rep* features bizarre sound effects; braggadocio gem *Step In The Arena* uses a sublime bassline and a piercing horn riff; the chest-thumping declaration of Gang Starr's rap supremacy *Check The Technique* uses hand claps, strings and scratching, and the mellow ode to heartbreak *Lovesick* incorporates supple horns and subtle drums. Fans took notice.

"He'll create a completely new sound," Christina Aguilera told me of DJ Premier in a February 2006 interview. The acclaimed singer had DJ Premier produce several songs on her chart-topping 2006 album, Back To Basics. "He'll make a song out of bits and chops and pieces," Aguilera continued. "I know a lot of producers do it nowadays, but he's so clean and so creative when it comes to that. I have so much respect for him."

Step In The Arena was just the beginning of Gang Starr's ascent up rap's hierarchy of influence. The group's subsequent album, 1992's Daily Operation, built on its predecessor's strengths: Guru's commanding voice, precise flow, cinematic phrasing and exemplary vocabulary, as well as DJ Premier's transfixing studio wizardry. Chimes and an undulating, driving string pattern create an elegant backing for Guru's cautionary tale of violence on *Soliloquy Of Chaos*. And the pounding break beat, piano plunks and sharp scratching on *Take It Personal* match Guru's harsh dismissal of both a backstabbing friend and critics of sampling.

As Gang Starr's credibility and artistry continued to grow, they began to deviate from their jazzy sound and experiment with a harder one, one that echoed the grimier sound that rap at large was shifting toward. But Guru wanted to sustain their original jazzy sound, and in 1993 he released Jazzmatazz – an album on which he collaborated with several esteemed guest artists, and one that had many wondering if Gang Star were finished. Furthermore, as potent as Guru was as a rapper, Daily Operation's spectacular production catapulted DJ Premier to the upper echelon of beatmakers. He quickly supplied KRS-One, Nas, The Notorious B.I.G. and Gang Starr protégé Jeru The Damaja with infectious beats.

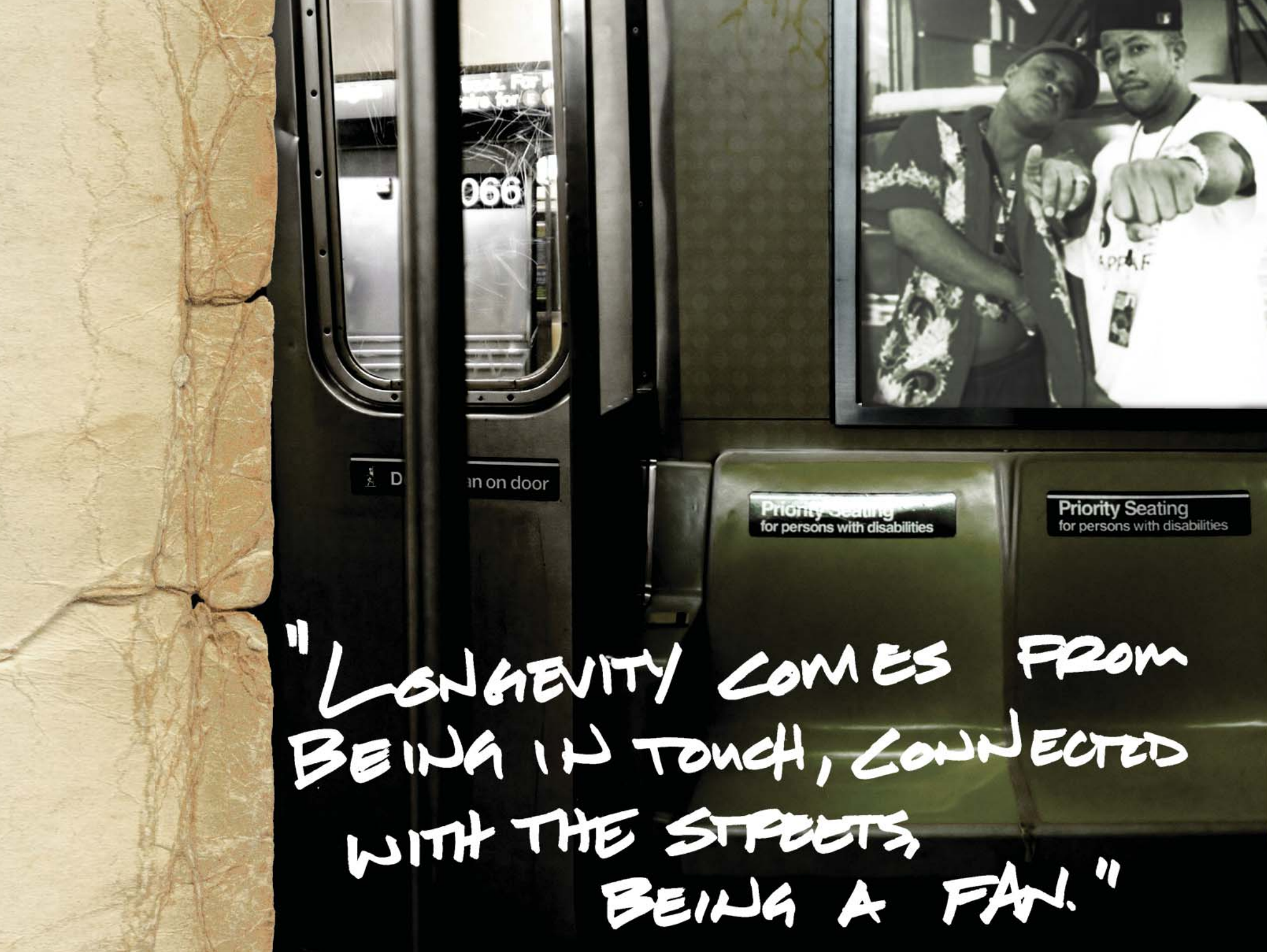
The next year, Gang Starr showed that Guru and DJ Premier's individual projects had only enhanced the group's potency. Hard To Earn, released in 1994, features a harder-edged Guru and DJ Premier, as standouts *Mass Appeal* and *Code Of The Streets* attest.

But for all the respect and accolades that Gang Starr had earned, the pair had yet to earn a Gold album for their efforts. That changed with 1998's Moment Of Truth, which boasts the militaristic posse cut *The Militia*, the meditative, philosophical *Above The Clouds* and the warm-hearted tribute to women, *Royalty*. Gang Starr sustained its consistency with 2003's The Ownerz, which spawned the underground favorite *Skills* and the confrontational *Put Up Or Shut Up*.

"The longevity comes from being in touch, connected with the streets, being a fan," Guru told me in a July 1999 interview. "Premier and I are fans of the music. We listen to everything. We maintain that hunger, that same energy that we had when we first started in the game."

Best Of Gang Starr backs that up lyric after lyric, beat after beat, track after track.

~ Soren Baker,
author of The Music Library:
The History of Rap and Hip-Hop
Los Angeles / September 2006



"LONGEVITY COMES FROM BEING IN TOUCH, CONNECTED WITH THE STREETS, BEING A FAN."

1. Manifest
(Elam – Martin – Gibbs) From the Wild Pitch Records release No More Mr. Nice Guy (#98709, 1989) Produced By D.J. Premier & The Guru Keithy E Ⓟ 1989, 2003 Wild Pitch Records LLC Courtesy of Wild Pitch Records LLC

2. Step in the Arena
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Step In The Arena (#21798, 1991) Produced by D.J. Premier and The Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1990 Virgin Records America, Inc.

3. Put Up or Shut Up (Feat. Krumbsnatcha)
(Elam – Martin – Gibbs) From the Virgin Records release The Ownerz (#80247, 2003) Produced by D.J. Premier for Gang Starr Productions Inc. Co-Produced by Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Krumbsnatcha appears courtesy of Guru Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 2003 Virgin Records America, Inc.

4. Skills
(Elam – Martin) From the Virgin Records release The Ownerz (#80247, 2003) Produced by D.J. Premier for Gang Starr Productions Inc. Co-Produced by Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 2002 Virgin Records America, Inc.

5. Code of the Streets
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Hard To Earn (#28435, 1994) Produced by D.J. Premier and Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Contains a sample of *Little Green Apples* by Monk Higgins. Courtesy of Capitol Records, Inc. (Written by Bobby Russell. Courtesy of Polygram International Licensing, Inc. / ASCAP) Ⓟ 1994 Virgin Records America, Inc.

6. Ex-Girl to Next Girl
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Daily Operation (#21910, 1992) Produced by D.J. Premier and "The Guru" for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1992 Virgin Records America, Inc.

7. Soliloquy of Chaos
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Daily Operation (#21910, 1992) Produced by D.J. Premier and "The Guru" for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1992 Virgin Records America, Inc.

8. The Militia (Feat. Big Shug and Freddie Foxxx)
(Elam – Martin – Guy – Campbell) From the Noo Trybe Records release Moment Of Truth (#45585, 1998) Produced by D.J. Premier and co-produced by Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Big Shug appears courtesy of PayDay Records Ⓟ 1998 Virgin Records America, Inc.

9. Above the Clouds (Feat. Inspectah Deck)
(Elam – Martin – Hunter) From the Noo Trybe Records release Moment Of Truth (#45585, 1998) Produced by D.J. Premier and co-produced by Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Inspectah Deck appears courtesy of Loud Records Ⓟ 1998 Virgin Records America, Inc.

10. Check the Technique
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Step In The Arena (#21798, 1990) Produced by D.J. Premier and The Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1990 Virgin Records America, Inc.

11. Royalty (Feat. K-Ci & JoJo)
(Elam – Martin – Hailey – Hailey) From the Noo Trybe Records release Moment Of Truth (#45585, 1998) Produced by D.J. Premier and co-produced by Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. K-Ci & JoJo appear courtesy of MCA Records Ⓟ 1998 Virgin Records America, Inc.

12. Lovesick
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Step In The Arena (#21798, 1991) Produced by D.J. Premier and The Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1990 Virgin Records America, Inc.

13. Take It Personal
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Daily Operation (#21910, 1992) Produced by D.J. Premier and "The Guru" for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1992 Virgin Records America, Inc.

14. Now You're Mine
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Hard To Earn (#28435, 1994) Produced by D.J. Premier and Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1994 Virgin Records America, Inc.

15. Just to Get a Rep
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Step In The Arena (#21798, 1991) Produced by D.J. Premier and The Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1990 Virgin Records America, Inc.

16. B.Y.S.
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Daily Operation (#21910, 1992) Produced by D.J. Premier and "The Guru" for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1992 Virgin Records America, Inc.

17. Mass Appeal
(Elam – Martin) From the Chrysalis Records release Hard To Earn (#28435, 1994) Produced by D.J. Premier and Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 1994 Virgin Records America, Inc.

18. DWYCK (Feat. Nice & Smooth)
(Elam – Martin – Mays – Barnes) From the Chrysalis Records release Hard To Earn (#28435, 1994) Produced by D.J. Premier and Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Nice & Smooth appear courtesy of Def Jam/RAL/Columbia/Sony Music Ⓟ 1994 Virgin Records America, Inc.

Bonus Tracks

19. Natural
(Elam – Martin) From the Virgin Records Japanese import release of The Ownerz (#68470, 2004) Produced by D.J. Premier for Gang Starr Productions Inc. Co-Produced by Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 2002 Virgin Records America, Inc.

20. Tha Squeeze
(Elam – Martin) From the Virgin Records Japanese import release of The Ownerz (#68470, 2004) Also appears on the Training Day film soundtrack (Priority Records #50237, 2001) Produced by D.J. Premier and co-produced by Guru for Gang Starr Productions, Inc. Ⓟ 2001 Priority Records, LLC

Videos now available for download:
- Mass Appeal
- Skills

Now available as ringtunes:
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- Mass Appeal
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